User Studies and Library Planning

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STUDIES OF USE and users are becoming fairly standard in library planning, and attest to a changing concept of what constitutes effective service. At the same time, too much is often expected of use studies, as of any new planning tool, and disillusionment sets in when a library laboriously gathers extensive data and then wonders what to do with it. This article describes the several kinds of use studies, and then attempts to appraise what they contribute and do not contribute to the planning process.

There is a long history of reader studies in American librarianship—only a few highlights need be mentioned here. The long but thin line starts with nonscientific investigators like John Cotton Dana[1] and Charles Compton.[2] In the 1920s and 1930s the stream widened and deepened, with the efforts first of William Gray and Ruth Monroe[3] and then of Douglas Waples,[4] all seeking to utilize reliable samples and to reach valid conclusions. It is instructive to contrast the net results of the earlier impressionistic and the later scientific studies: one gathers from Compton that it is laboring men who read the classics and from Waples that even well educated people read what comes most conveniently to hand. The pre-1950 investigations were pulled together by Berelson in his report for the Public Library Inquiry,[5] and he went one important step further to raise questions about what the findings meant for library policy. A recent study with a longer perspective traces the development of reader studies in an effort to gain verified knowledge as part of the basis for a library "science."[6]

In any case, until recently use studies were not an integral tool for library planning, but were efforts apart from it, usually conducted by academics rather than practitioners and administrators. Individual libraries were appraised and statewide library plans devised with little

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feedback from users, and once programs were instituted, little effort was made to determine whether they had the desired effects on use.

Investigations of use and users are still infrequent in day-to-day library management, but they have appeared with some regularity in statewide planning (New York, Maryland, Illinois, California) and also in commissioned surveys of individual libraries (New York City, Baltimore, Chicago, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle). Essentially they are an aspect of community analysis, dealing as they do with the particular form of functional behavior of people—their search for information and recorded knowledge—that relates most closely to library service.

VARIETIES OF USER STUDIES

User studies addressed themselves initially, and in increasingly large numbers, to the "who, what, when and where" of library use. A smaller number of studies have probed the way libraries are used, and with what success. Only a few have sought to penetrate why users turn to libraries, and what effects library use has.

First-level investigations of who, what, when and where are beneficial, as long as the limitations of such data are understood. If a library wanted to know the hourly and daily volume and flow of use in order to allocate staff time, it would keep a simple door count (an elementary form of user study). If a library wants to check the balance and spread of its acquisitions with the balance and spread of materials utilization, it will analyze and classify recent purchase lists against a parallel classification of titles actually used (as shown by circulation records) and a sample of items left on reading tables; some thought-provoking matches and mismatches may emerge (another form of use study). If a proposal for a new branch has been made, analysis of registration and circulation records will show the present coverage of the affected area (still another form of use study, even though no questionnaires are involved). Or, if a public library, noting declining adult circulation figures, wants to find out whether the decline is caused by an increasing number of students using their school and college libraries, a short-form questionnaire, administered on a sample basis at six-month intervals, will provide the answer.

Note that in each example what the agency wants to find out is determined before any study was undertaken. These are not scatter-shot investigations. If one sets a close and limited target, one can get clear and valid data. Note also that the data obtained apply to

concrete management problems, and therefore directly facilitate the decision-making process.

Studies of how libraries are used, and with what success, have been less frequent than the who, what, when, and where variety. This is surprising in one sense, because the alert practitioner can usually make a fairly reasonable estimate of who the library users are without a formal study, but this is much less true concerning their success or failure in getting what they seek. One factor inhibiting use studies may be the curious indifference to follow-up in professional/client relations that characterizes most librarians, whether public, school or academic. The collection is organized, the catalog created, the initial guidance given at the reference desk, and then it is taken on faith that all goes well with the user. This is analogous to the physician prescribing without checking to see if the fever subsides or the professor lecturing without determining whether anything is learned. The point could be pushed to the stage where the librarian's claim to be a professional would be called into question, but this is not the place to do so.

What must be considered here is whether librarians really want studies that probe into adequacies and inadequacies of the library/user interface. Several years ago two investigations were conducted that raised serious questions about the accuracy and thoroughness of reference information provided by public libraries.[7] One would think that these sober findings would prompt every library to reexamine itself, but few such reviews have occurred; and where the possibility has been raised by an occasional hard-headed administrator, professional staff members have resisted. One can only speculate about the reasons for this. One possibility is that most librarians are convinced that their reference service is accurate and thorough; but if this is the case, why not put it to the test? Another possibility is that librarians are uncertain about the success of their ministrations to users, and simply do not want to find out.

Still another factor inhibiting use studies that attempt to examine how the library is used is the technical difficulty involved. Patrons cannot just be observed, although even this, done systematically, could begin to indicate common patterns or strategies of search. Mere observation, however, would not indicate why the searcher is following a particular sequence, or whether it leads him to his goal. Individual questioning is necessary, and this is time-consuming. Even if the time is invested, users' responses may not be revealing or even very accurate. For one thing, many library users do not want to be identified as unskilled and inept in utilizing bibliographical and information

sources. In addition, users may be uncertain or vague about what materials actually exist, and therefore have no criterion for determining whether or not they are locating what is available. Finally, most users regard library service not so much as a right to which they are entitled or as a product for which they pay directly and for which they expect value received, but more as a kind of dividend or gift; thus, their expectations from libraries are not high, they are grateful for small favors, and are not disposed to dwell on shortcomings in service.

All this is not intended to discourage efforts to determine user experience in relation to libraries, but rather to put such efforts on a realistic basis. As straightforward an activity as talking with people while they use the catalog—asking them, for example, how they would look up a pamphlet issued by the U.S. government—can be revealing both to the cataloger and to the reference librarian. Finding out whether users obtain what they seek can be reassuring (the majority usually give a favorable report) and disturbing (a distinct minority are far from satisfied). The point is to recognize that one is dealing with a fairly complex form of behavior and that responses from users have to be appraised and interpreted and cannot always be taken at face value.

User studies undertaken specifically for evaluative purposes constitute a special and neglected category. When a library manager is asked if there is value in knowing more about library users, the answer will usually be affirmative. However, the administrator, having responded to user data with new or extended services, is likely to be less enthusiastic about checking on what has and has not been achieved. Yet the criterion for innovation is not newness but effectiveness. The most important component of an experiment such as the Action Library in Philadelphia may not be the new concept involved (building service into the learning experiences of children and adolescents rather than conceiving service as an appendage following from learning experiences elsewhere), but rather the thorough follow-up on what the users proceed to do in the library, in the home, and in the classroom as a result of the alternative service concept.

Carrying use studies even further, to question why libraries are used and whether such use significantly changes or benefits either the individual or the community, takes one into psychological and sociological realms considered outside the librarian's expertise. A few such studies have been made by social scientists since the work inspired by Waples in the 1930s.[8] In Europe there has been a modest tradition of reading research,[9] but for the most part American librarianship lacks roots in the foundations of reading and information transfer.

Occasional efforts by librarians to strengthen the core of librarianship with cross-fertilization from cognate fields come to mind: the Public Library Inquiry, for example, which explicitly turned to social scientists; and the joining of school librarians with a related professional group, the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, in order to produce standards for school media centers. But these are sporadic exceptions. The profession does not maintain regular and fruitful contacts either with basic disciplines or with other applied fields that could help to characterize the library as an educational and social institution. Library schools offering doctoral programs seldom encourage examination of social and psychological foundations by means of user studies, nor does such work hold any place in the limited research production of their faculties.

Thus, we have an increasing number of applied and specific studies which often prove useful in practice although limited in their long-range impact, occasional efforts to appraise library use which encounter methodological problems, and a few examples of socio-psychological studies which do not yet constitute a continuing and coordinated program of research into the morphology of library use or of information transfer. Until all three types advance in conjunction, the input into library planning from use and user studies will be marginal.

THE INCLUSIVE USER STUDY

It is when a library comes to a general or inclusive user study, as distinct from an applied investigation designed to answer explicit questions, that confusion and even disillusionment set in. The venture is usually started for the best of motives. Libraries are service enterprises, and service will be better if the nature and the needs of the clientele are known. User orientation should balance resources orientation for effective service.

But when the question is raised concerning what the library wants to know about its users, and how the information will be applied to planning, ambiguities appear. The librarian's initial reason for undertaking a user study is "to know my readers." But surely the practitioner in any daily contact with patrons has some idea of who they are. Perhaps the justification for the study is given to be: "to know my readers better"—to know more of their needs, habits and problems, and to understand them as individuals.

Paradoxically, most general reader studies elicit group rather than individual characteristics: sex, age groups, educational levels, and

occupation are sought. One can classify users with this information, but only to a limited extent can one individualize them. This was apparent in the 1930s when the combination of an empathetic librarian and a rising automation entrepreneur led to the encoding on IBM cards of the social characteristics of registrants of the Montclair (New Jersey) Public Library. With the system in operation and the sorting machines running smoothly, a meeting was convened at which the library administrators posed the question: What will we do with the data?

The same question is asked today when a library finds, for example, that more than one-half of its adult users are college graduates and that their income level is distinctly above average. One logical answer was offered by Berelson: concentrate service on this elite. Several decades of pronouncements by librarians have resisted this conclusion. The point is not whether the Berelson inference is right or wrong, but either that reading is a highly individualistic form of activity in our otherwise standardized society, or that the reading of all groups tends to coalesce in the flood of mass communications; in either case planning by a reading agency cannot proceed on the basis of group characteristics determined by the typical user study.

But what of the study designed to get at user "needs"? Surely this is a worthy aim, and if achieved would prove to be less academic than classification by census cateogories. But "needs" is a slippery concept to define, and even if we know what we mean by the term, they are most difficult to identify. An individual considering his own needs will sense what is involved. Many people have not stopped to reflect on needs; others cannot articulate what they want, or are ashamed or embarrassed to do so. The researcher must seek to bridge the gap by suggesting kinds of needs (on questionnaires or in interviews), projecting what he or she feels ought to be the wants and aspirations of respondents. The latter, seeing a way out, choose one or several socially approved responses even though they would not read a book on the subject if it were placed before them in technicolor and with accompanying music.

Too often the choices of "needs" are a projection of what the investigator, with all his preconceptions, believes they should be, and not what is established by hard evidence. What he has set out to catch thus slips through the net of inquiry, so the size and nature of what has escaped is reconstructed from mere glimpses in the murky water.

Interests, as distinct from needs, may be somewhat easier to determine, since most people can define to some extent what they are interested in. The pitfall here is that honest responses run the complete

gamut, from the trivial to the noble, from the socially approved to the most self-centered.

At this point use studies become research in its most amoral form, which may be appropriate for a commercial enterprise that wants to provide whatever will sell, but not for an educational enterprise that is supposed to have some social purpose which justifies the expenditure of public funds. Quite separate from the value implications involved, market research has pragmatic limitations. A manufacturer would not become rich by asking people what they want or need, but would attempt to build a market by sensing human aspirations, creating a product considered to be consistent with these aspirations and producing it. He might produce a Volkswagen or an Edsel; in either case, the customer cannot say before the fact that this is what he does or does not need.

There are more fundamental reasons why general studies of library users have produced limited results to date. Library use as such may not be what should be studied, or it may not be the best way to get what the library planner needs to know. Libraries are not separate from other informational and educational sources in the community. People acquire recorded knowledge from a wide range of sources, starting with their daily newpaper, so that the library is one component in a system, and should be studied in this light. The user study is not equivalent to the community study, but is only a part of it, dealing with that portion of the constituency that thus far responded to the agency. The proper study of library use and nonuse starts the study of communication—the transfer of knowledge—throughout the community.

There is nothing wrong with questioning people at the library door, provided it is not assumed that this covers the entire range of people in their total search. Actually the library study reaches only a fragment of the whole; one of the first questions to be examined is what fragment that is.

The usual library use study is an examination of the agency as it exists and of responses by the community to present provision. It is not a survey of total media use and information seeking—although it is sometimes mistakenly treated as such—nor is it an analysis of what response would be given to a library differently conceived. Instead, it is a cross section of what is occurring under prevailing assumptions held both by librarians and by patrons as to what service should be, and under prevailing financial support within those assumptions. In other words, general library use studies are survey research and not

experimental research, and as such tell us what is rather than what should be. If this built-in limitation is recognized, such surveys can help us to see more clearly where we are now. A sound example of this type is a British study conducted a decade ago.[10]

STUDIES OF NONUSERS

It stands to reason that a degree of affinity exists between a library and its users. To some extent the agency is relevant to needs and interests, and to some extent its organization proves usable; otherwise, the users would not be there. Once there, users should be contacted by the librarian, and studied as individuals to obtain continuing feedback for appraising and replanning services.

None of this is feasible with nonusers, who constitute well over one-half the community for the public library, and sizable proportions for school and college libraries also. The case can be advanced that if any formal study is to be made, i.e., if the time and money are to be expended, it would best be directed to those who do not come to the library.

Do some people in the service area or service group lack needs and interests for which recorded knowledge is required? How many have such needs or interests but fulfill them to their satisfaction from sources other than the library? Are there some who have tried the library in the past and found it not suitable for their purpose, and if so, why? Are there others with incipient needs and interests who do not know that suitable materials exist, or that the library has them? Few librarians could give even approximate answers to such questions for the community just beyond their doors.

Going into the community at large to seek answers is a most complex and costly undertaking. Impressions can be gained by contacting individuals by chance and by talking with organized groups, but any valid study involves a random sample of a heterogeneous and dispersed population, and involves interviews in some depth. Few sizable communities can be adequately covered with a sample of fewer than 1000 respondents, and interviews by competent agencies currently cost $20 per call, so that the investment required is quite substantial. The sample size can be reduced somewhat by concentrating on one or more subgroups which the library is clearly not reaching—e.g., undereducated adults, avant-garde sophisticates, or top business executives—but even then the task is formidable.

Where studies involving nonusers have been made, the results have

had substance and have affected library planning. An example is the Baltimore area, where the series of Deiches studies was based on data from a random sample of 1,913 households;[11] and more recently a survey was made by a government agency[12] of information needs of citizens. Findings and recommendations have guided policy-making in the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

In view of the potential value of data about nonusers, and of the considerable technical skill and cost involved, libraries with some similarity in population composition might well combine in commissioning and funding thorough studies. Some library schools, in conjunction with the social research centers of their universities, are competent to carry out such assignments. Another alternative is for the state library agency to commission and finance studies of nonuser groups that characterize several parts of the state. Librarians have come to hold the attitude that scientific research is desirable if carried out by others and paid for by the government. Now that federal funds are more difficult to obtain, individual libraries and state library agencies—if they are seriously concerned about user needs and responses—might well take steps to acquire their own planning data. On the statewide level, if this were to be designed not as a one-time cross-section review, but as a periodic series of studies, with some of the same type of information gathered at intervals, the result would be a running record of trends and a much clearer idea of whether efforts to improve service or to meet changed conditions have actually made a difference. The statistics which states usually acquire annually show expenditures for service provision in the form of money, materials and staff time; user data similarly acquired on a sample basis would show what is accomplished by the investment.

GUIDELINES FOR USER STUDIES

Various pitfalls and limitations of user studies have been indicated here. Essentially they involve expecting too much from the studies and inherent problems in eliciting information from people about an activity to which they attach value judgments.

Given these conditions, how can user studies be made most productive for planning policy and programs? The first and essential guideline is to determine at the outset exactly what information is needed. Any library staff contemplating a user study would do well first to define its purposes as precisely as possible. This will determine what data are to be gathered and the size and cost of the investigation.

This functional approach will also make clear that the more questions to which answers are sought, the more complex and costly the effort involved. Every question contemplated should be subjected to the rigorous test of whether the information is really needed and exactly how it will be used.

Once purposes are clear, there is little problem in obtaining responses from library users and even nonusers. Properly approached, library patrons respect an effort to learn more about them and their needs, in order to serve them better. Breaking the ice is more difficult with nonusers, but once they are convinced that a sales gimmick is not involved, most enjoy talking about their reading hopes and habits. Handled well, a use study can render public relations dividends.

This does not mean that all patrons will automatically fill out a questionnaire thrust into their hands. A study lacks reliability if one-half of the forms are found left blank within the library, and this is what occurs if there is no follow-up. What must be done is to check with visitors as they leave; if this is done politely but firmly, returns can usually be obtained from more than 90 percent of the users.

This rate of return can be achieved if the questionnaire is kept within two pages at most, and to less than ten minutes of response time. Interestingly, if interviews are used instead of questionnaires, library patrons are usually prepared to give more than ten minutes, once they are convinced that a study is designed to improve service; something in the human relationship renders respondents willing to talk for twenty minutes when they may not devote ten minutes to a question form.

In either case, questions should be concrete and immediate—not "How often do you use the library?" but "When was your last visit to the library before today?"; not "What do use the library for?" but "What are you seeking on this visit?" Such questions can be answered more accurately, and are likely to be answered more honestly because people are less disposed to embroider or misrepresent what they are currently doing when the contrary evidence is in full view. Whereas keeping questions specific and immediate may elicit data about non-typical visits on the part of a few users, this is more than counterbalanced by getting hard facts rather than vague hopes. In any case the returns will be used to establish patterns and not to minister to single individuals.

Such inquiries must clearly be done on a sampling basis, both to conserve staff time and to avoid repeated questioning of the same individuals. A week is usually adequate time or two or three different weeks during the year if there are marked variations in use in different seasons. Within the week, some morning, afternoon, evening and

weekend hours should be included. It is more important to get as complete returns as possible from all users within the sample hours, rather than extending the study over a longer period simply to accumulate more responses.

One instrument for obtaining data is the short-form questionnaire. It has the advantages of economy and control: specific information can be obtained from a reliable sample of users without excessive time and cost. However, it is circumscribed in scope and depth, and should be used only when the purposes of the study are narrow and specific.

Another methodology is the interview—in the library for users, in the home for nonusers. This approach is as productive as the interviewer is skilled, and librarians, by definition, should be skilled in getting at individual interests and needs. Interviews are clearly time-consuming, and they pose special problems in getting representative samples. This method suits survey purposes of insight into reader motives and user strategies in acquiring knowledge. It should be used not only for one-time formal studies, but as an integral means of continuing client/professional relations.

VALUE OF USER STUDIES

Planned investigations of use and users can be a productive part of a comprehensive community study—the part that goes to the heart of community/library relations. User data strengthens the planning and decision-making processes at several levels.

Investigations should begin with mundane, day-to-day applications. An example is scrutiny of the reserve file, which is one reflection of demand and of adequacy or inadequacy of collections in meeting demand. A few of the most-wanted titles can be selected and calculations made of average reader waiting time. If this time is several weeks or even months, one does not have to talk to individuals to predict what their reactions would be. This simple example of the reserve file also illustrates limitations of user data. Any librarian who adopts a policy of adding copies as soon as three, five or ten reserves accumulate has no clear sense of purpose or standards, treating all titles as having equal weight.

Beyond such spot applications, but still on the level of operations, user data are essential to systems analysis. Libraries are far from being models of efficiency in either their organizational or their delivery systems. The work of Philip Morse indicates how objective evidence such as length of stay and waiting time at service desks can be

used to apportion resources and staff.[13] Morris Hamburg interprets such data further to propose an overall measure of response to libraries in the form of "document exposure time."[14]

User information is a key component in measurement and evaluation. For a long time libraries have based their requests for funds, materials and staff on standards or norms which deal only with the inputs into library service, without any indicators of outcomes or accomplishments. The recent proposal for performance measures for public libraries continues to rely primarily on inputs, but does have one unit for public response concerning sex and occupation of users, user satisfaction, and time spent in the building.[15] Such measures are compared to norms, which tell how a library compares with other libraries, but not how it performs for its constituency.

Measurement data also enter the picture with program budgeting. Usually, designated programs are to be measured in terms of response (and therefore of volume of work and materials involved) on the basis of which funds will be allocated. Separate from program budgeting as such, the evidence of user satisfaction (which most studies find to be quite high) can be employed to convince funding authorities that the library is a people-oriented institution and not just a cultural depository.

User information can go deeper into the planning process. Administration so often hardens into a bureaucratic cycle of devising programs, allocating staff and materials, seeking funds to maintain the allocations, etc. User data showing gaps or limitations in the programs can break the cycle and lead to adjusted programs and different allocations. This exercise can prevent the bureaucratic joints from stiffening.

At the core of all this are questions of mission and purpose, which will press hard on the public library in particular in the period ahead. User demand alone will not determine purpose. This will come only from considerations of value interpreted by professionals and laypersons together. However, input from users constitutes one of the few tangibles in this philosophic endeavor, and keeps the planners in touch with reality.

The one underlying danger in user studies is that examination and renewal of the professional/client relationship can come to be thought of as a separate and "sometime" activity, a kind of one-time or periodic endeavor to be engaged in when the librarian can spare time from the pressing realities of day-to-day service. Formal and intensified investigations may be necessary at intervals, but eliciting user response

should be an integral part of the ongoing practice of the librarian, providing constant rather than just occasional feedback. Any librarian on duty should at the same time be an observer of use patterns. Perhaps in the end the greatest benefit of user orientation may not be neat reports, replete with statistical tables; rather, the benefits should infuse the practice of librarianship, thus not only helping the librarian in planning but also the users themselves every time they turn to the agency.

There is a step beyond. Policy-making for libraries has been mainly in the hands of professionals; the administrator and staff determine aims and programs for the most part, with trustees furnishing the stamp of approval. This may not be the structure of the future. Our institutions are being questioned, as is the role of professionals within them. If and as libraries become more essential, people will seek a more direct and active voice in what they do. The effective administrator of these next years will reach out to this prospect, and the effective practitioner will welcome it. At that point user studies (librarians learning about their clientele) will move on to user participation (librarians and users together determining policy and program), and then the gap between the institution and the public which user studies are designed to bridge will no longer exist.

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